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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 7, 2005

NORTON WARNS RIDGE THAT SOUTH CAROLINA HAZARDOUS RAIL DISASTER WOULD BE MORE SERIOUS
HERE Washington, DC—The Office of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton today released a letter she wrote to Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge after the ultra hazardous rail car catastrophe in South Carolina and said that the similarity raises to a higher level the “most pressing security matter for the District of Columbia and the entire National Capital Region”—the transportation of ultra hazardous chemical cargo by rail within blocks of the Capitol and through the city and the region. In South Carolina, seven people were killed by the fumes, and more than 200 people went to hospitals, all from inhaling fatal, toxic chlorine fumes that resulted from a train collision involving cars carrying various toxic chemicals.

Norton, a member of the Homeland Security Committee, wrote that the South Carolina accident is a tragic demonstration on a much smaller scale of what could occur if there were a terrorist attack on similar shipments of highly toxic materials that travel frequently through this area, where the federal presence and a dense population are concentrated. She said, “In light of the unmistakable and terrifying risk here, a pilot test for rerouting in the National Capital Region, where it appears feasible, could provide valuable information for the development of national strategies,” including, but not limited to rerouting. Norton asked to receive a vulnerability assessment and security plan promised for many months. The full text of Norton’s letter follows.

January 7, 2005

The Honorable Tom Ridge
Secretary, Department of Homeland Security

Dear Secretary Ridge:

I write in light of Thursday’s rail car catastrophe in Graniteville, South Carolina that raises to a higher level the serious concern in the District and region about the transportation of ultra hazardous materials by rail within blocks of the Capitol and through the city and region. As you may be aware, a 42-car freight train accidentally collided with a smaller stationary train in South Carolina, leaking deadly chlorine gas from one of three cars carrying liquid chlorine. Two freight cars also were carrying other hazardous substances — cresol and sodium hydroxide.

As a result of the collision, seven people died from inhaling the fatal, toxic chlorine fumes; more than 200 hundred people with difficulty breathing had to be treated in hospitals; 5,400 people within a mile of the chlorine spill were evacuated while other residents were told to stay inside. Governor Mark Sanford declared a state of emergency for Aiken County where the incident occurred approximately ten miles northeast of Augusta, Georgia.

The South Carolina accident is a tragic demonstration on a much smaller scale of what could occur if there were a terrorist attack on similar shipments of highly toxic materials that travel frequently through this area where the federal presence is concentrated. If the same accident had occurred here with our 200,000 federal employees and dense residential areas, the fatalities and even panic would almost certainly have been greater.

This is the most pressing security matter for the District of Columbia and the entire National Capital Region. The regional vulnerability stems from 42 miles of track in nearby Virginia, Maryland, and the District over which ultra hazardous chemical cargo, including chlorine, ammonia, and hydrochloric and sulfuric acid travel within four miles of the U.S. Capitol complex. For example, depending on the wind conditions, an attack on one 90 pound rail car carrying ultra hazardous chemicals could release gases that would carry for 14 miles or more in various directions and could kill or injure up to 100,000 city and regional residents in a half hour, even those people inside buildings.

Of course these trains are routinely rerouted during events such as the upcoming inauguration and other mass events on the National Mall, but we have no information that rerouting occurs at other times to safeguard residents and federal employees.

As a member of the Homeland Security Committee, I am aware that there are undoubtedly a number of ways to manage this dangerous problem. Rerouting may be possible and necessary in some jurisdictions, such as the D.C. area, where the entire federal presence is located, but not in other places. In light of the unmistakable and terrifying risk here, a pilot test for rerouting in the National Capital Region, where it appears feasible, could provide valuable information for the development of a number of national strategies tailored to a variety of locations.

We understand that the Department has been studying the situation for some time but even the vulnerability assessment and security plan promised for many months has not been forthcoming. I ask to receive the assessment and to know of any plans you have to safeguard the region from a catastrophe of this nature. Please also provide this information to the chairs of the Homeland Security Committee and the Government Reform Committee.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Holmes Norton Washington, DC—The Office of Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton
a letter she wrote to Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge after the ultra hazardous rail car catastrophe in South Carolina and said that the similarity raises to a higher level the “most pressing security matter for the District of Columbia and the entire National Capital Region”—the transportation of ultra hazardous chemical cargo by rail within blocks of the Capitol and through the city and the region. In South Carolina